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The Intersection of Rhetoric and Persuasion:

A Theory of Self-Persuasion

**Introduction**

The political environment in modern society is extremely polarized. On any issue, political or not, individuals are unable to find agreement on virtually everything. Persuasion becomes a prominent tool in the fight for a consensus, but the process is extremely difficult to accomplish on any level. Because of the lack of compromise and abundant incivility, rhetoric and public discourse are often perceived with a negative connotation. However, the current perception on modern politics does influence everyday life. It reflects the ideological conflicts in our culture, and the willingness to accept and consider opposing viewpoints.

The discussion on persuasion and argument has been explored through numerous theories for thousands of years (Warman 48). Rhetoric has almost always been associated with power and manipulation. The new age of information and internet media poses new questions for the future of rhetoric and argumentation. Public discourse may stem away from the use of twisted facts that are irrelevant. Yet, the fundamental relationship between rhetoric and persuasion has and will not change. The methods exercised in argumentation have endeavored in continuous repetition throughout time. Undoubtedly, the practice of rhetoric substantially impacts how we see and feel about our country, local community, and even our world. The study is not concerned with politics or political behavior. It just happens that political argumentation and public discourse offer the most insightful examples of rhetoric and aspired persuasion.

In this proposal, I want to address a new system that links the relationship between rhetoric and persuasion while addressing the power that public discourse may or may not have over a generic populace. The traditional focus has been on unconscious persuasion that has been able to control the masses and support its own interests. Researchers have been trying to gather data in efforts to uncover the stronger and more useful practices of rhetoric, and their effectiveness regarding persuasion. The reoccurring problems with traditional methods are that they are continuously being repeated and they are not incorporating the questions of how or why persuasion is occurring.

In response to the lack of progress within contemporary research, this proposal is centered on the thought processing of individuals. The idea is propelled by the work of Antonia Larrain and Andres Haye, in which they acknowledged a theory on self-persuasion. A qualitative mentality can deliver the insights on an individual’s thoughts and attitudes as the audience members are exposed to rhetoric in public discourse. I want to focus on the process that rhetoric develops in personal thoughts rather than the successfulness of persuasion.

Using this approach, the question now involves the role that rhetoric has on our thoughts. More importantly, what practices of rhetoric have the most influence on our thought process? I want to discover the most effective means of communication that rhetoric can offer based on a psychology concept, which involves the power of our own thoughts. In essence, an audience member chooses the dialogue inside his or her own thought procession. Every person chooses what opposing arguments he or she wants to engage in within their own minds. The centralized question becomes: how does rhetoric implement its argument into the cognitive dialogue of individuals in effort to enhance the overall capacity of persuasion on a personal level? The research must narrowly concentrate on the relationship between the process of interaction with rhetoric and the communication of information inside our own minds. An appropriate method for conducting research is crucial for the success of this study.

**Literature Review**

Historical Origins and the Ongoing Relationship

The intersection of rhetoric and persuasion has been an open-ended topic of discussion since the time of Socrates (Warman 48). The early civilizations were trying to uncover the true nature of persuasion. Curiosity itself was not the driving motive, as seen in contemporary academic research, but instead, the knowledge associated with persuasion was seen as an opportunity for power. Rulers would practice different strategies of rhetoric in public discourse, so that they could find a way to control citizens. On a philosophical level, the subject was in constant conflict. Aristotle believed that rhetoric was a form of art, while Plato saw it as mind control (Barlow 1238; Shabo 7). In almost all of the academic research surrounding persuasion, these ancient philosophers are not only mentioned, but are used as a foundation for modern ideas.

Admittedly, the conversations that are currently taking place are mere imitations of early concepts. All of the arguments are theories disassociated with any sense of absolute truth. The fact of the matter is that persuasion is very difficult to induce. Argumentation alone will rarely leave one party persuaded by the other. From my extensive reading, quantitative analyses have shown that facts and evidence are not strong enough to sway an individual’s idealistic perspective. If a scientific approach delved into the chemical landscape of persuasion, it would have to incorporate all of the unknown aspects of consciousness (Appelbaum 354). So in hindsight, scientific analysis offers a very limited evaluation of the subject. The only reoccurring theme among the ancient voices was the use of philosophy to describe the practice as previously stated. Moreover, I want to conduct further exploration through a new lens that reflects more of a philosophical approach rather than a scientific study.

Contemporary Research

With regard to the broad spectrum of philosophical inquiry on the subject, Daniel O’Keefe circumvents the problems by declaring that persuasion is relative based on the way attitude influences behavior (17). The formation of this thought stems from all of the various instances where persuasion has been achieved. Every individual instance is different and does not lead scholars to the underlining questions of how and why. It is important to note that persuasion is relative to the individual, as is the initial intent to persuade (43). However, I feel that concluding an extensive research project with a catch-all phrase is practically giving up on your work. The different arguments, studies and strategies seemed to have already been pointing out that this process is not confined to a single method. In O’Keefe’s defense, it does reveal the frustration embodied in such a peculiar topic.

Part of the inherent frustration associated with persuasion is the opportunity that it allows for distracting arguments and manipulation, which can change opinions. Conversely, a proven truth can be rejected and opposed by individuals. The latter scenario poses a rather large threat and limitation to public discourse. Both of these instances relate to how an individual thinks. Bias can reject truth, while a distracting, unrelated statement can induce persuasion. The difference can be found in both the presentation and interpretation.

Although some individuals will never get over their bias, an attractive presentation can make a difference. Ethical arguments are more likely to be taken seriously by viewers. From there, thought processing and critical thinking can bring upon self-persuasion. An unethical argument may find itself coming up short because it is not taken seriously. The scholar James McTavish tries to separate ethos from rhetoric in public discourse. He points out that ethics can provide a background of morality that is embedded into the presentation (McTavish 68). Likewise, the ethical influence in argument is derived from the speaker. The morality aspect builds the person’s character to some degree as an authority figure (McTavish 69). The template ensures that rhetoric becomes a complementary aspect of the speaker.

In accordance with the practice of politics, irrelevant arguments can hide behind rhetoric (Walton 2). This impression is something that we all fear and what gives persuasion a sometimes negative connotation. *Relevance in Argumentation* goes into great detail to explain how legal cases have to categorize evidence as relevant or not. Irrelevant facts can be enticing enough to invalidate factual arguments. What’s more, there is rarely a fine line to determine if evidence is relevant or not (Walton 3). The book provides a substantial amount of background knowledge and a general understanding of the principles of argumentation. Yet, it fails to generate factual evidence. Walton’s work is identical to the larger discussion on persuasion because the subject is relative and full of theories that lack in-depth research.

Even if rhetoric fails to inform and irrelevant or distracting arguments are present it does bring upon a sense of understanding. Christian Plantin, argues that rhetoric should be practiced because the side effect known as alignment can become just as important when persuasion is rarely achieved. He makes a claim saying “Lucky is he who has the knack for persuading people; this person can become president” (90). The quote acknowledges the alleged relationship between power and persuasion while also noting that very few are capable of employing such a gift. The statement offers alignment as a more realistic goal. Nonetheless, the concept of alignment could easily be broken down and incorporated into the self-persuasion model. From the persuader’s standpoint, persuasion is the best outcome, with alignment an undesired result. However, if alignment is reached, the audience did take time to think about the argument. It only fell short in the thought processing stage, which still allowed for individuals to find an understanding amongst differences. Because of the unexpected externalities, politicians should find opportunities where their goal is not absolute persuasion when very few will ever be drawn away from their own beliefs.

Communication and rhetoric are offered as a solution to understand, or align, the increasing polarity of public discourse. Very rarely will someone find their persuasion efforts accomplished. Because of the infinite knowledge on the internet, arguments are now becoming less persuasive. Figures of authority can no longer hide knowledge from ordinary citizens. As a result, persuasion is now more of a choice than it has ever been. Persuasion has been an ongoing threat when audiences would allow themselves to be manipulated (Garsten 123). The political “fact checkers” and online databases have the ability to shape public discourse into a new system of transparency. The variable in effective argumentation is now getting the audience to actively listen without being clouded by misleading information. Positively speaking, humans have a natural inclination toward the truth, which will help shape the future role of argumentation and persuasion (Plantin 91).

Consequently, persuasion can be broken down into a standard communication model where interaction is both a process and product. Scholars are trying to figure out the exact formula for the perfect process that maximizes the capacity to persuade. Almost all of the books and journal articles focus on the process side of the equation. The great orator, Isocrates, happened to view this problem conversely (Haye and Larrain 223). He emphasized the interpretation of the viewers and the final product that rhetoric leaves for the audience.

The Self-Persuasion Model

My approach to persuasion will focus on the interpretation process of rhetoric and the possibility for persuasion. This proposal will research the effects of cognitive thought through an idea of self-persuasion. Authors Antonia Larrain and Andres Haye developed this theory on self- persuasion, in which they systematically incorporated Isocrates’ perspective. Essentially, the study theorized that people use thoughts to generate dialogue in their own mind. From there, they presumably take on an opinion or stance. Assuming that the arguments were constructed from an outside source, the stance they take is a result from persuasion. Isocrates’ focus would then be on the factors that ignited the cognitive rhetoric, which eventually influenced persuasion. This practice works backwards, examining individuals who have already been persuaded (Haye and Larrain 223-234).

Seemingly, the self-persuasion outlook implies that persuasion is a choice. It could be that persuasion is a gradual process that develops subconsciously, but the individual would still have chosen to think and dwell on the dialogue presented by others. Put another way, this model describes persuasion as either a direct choice or as a process that the individual allows to happen. For example, if an individual was seen to be manipulated by an argument, it would be the result of a personal choice to align with a particular opinion. The decision making becomes the most important phase. In addition, all of the forms of rhetoric and arguments presented have done their job once the audience begins to seriously consider the material.

The idea that people do in fact have a choice to be persuaded is a reassuring outlook on public discourse. Inadvertently, self-persuasion challenges the claim that politicians can control the opinions of society. The power now resides with the individual instead of the orator (Haye and Larrain 223). Persuasion can still be an important tool, but it is no longer something to fear. Whereas, the self-persuasion model views the field as a stimulating inquiry and less of a threat to democracy.

In order for an individual to become persuaded by their own account, they have to be open to different opinions held by others. It makes sense that an open-minded person would be more likely to change their opinion or point of view than someone who addresses an issue through the lens of an established bias (Reardon 35). Bias alone can resist any attempt of persuasion. Keeping a closed mind is similar to never even hearing the conversation. Not to say that sticking to one’s own beliefs is necessarily wrong. It just hinders the possibility of persuasion. Furthermore, the future of this conversation involves how the audience perceives information.

When people make decisions, they generally progress through some sort of cost-benefit analysis. We think of the potential benefits and disadvantages of every decision whether we are aware of it or not. With any given subject, this process could be severely altered with new information. The new information supplied is the force behind persuasion. It is within the concept of new information that problems start to arise within persuasion. New information can be irrelevant or inherently false. Persuasion receives a deviant connotation when distracting arguments change opinions. Conversely, a proven truth can be rejected and opposed by individuals (Walton 3). Both of these instances relate to how an individual thinks. Bias can reject truth, while a distracting, unrelated statement can induce persuasion. The difference can be found in both the presentation and interpretation.

The idea of self-persuasion is the main focus of my research proposal. I want to delve deeper into this theory and research the relationship between thought procession and persuasion. When the current conversation is describing persuasion as relative, flexible, frustrating and manipulative, a new approach should be taken. Through the self-persuasion model, research can consolidate the many adjectives that we give persuasion because they all reflect the different ways we engage in thinking. Although this may be considered a blanket statement, this theory gives one unified approach that incorporates how we observe rhetoric and what we do with the information.

**Method**

In order to fully reveal the thoughts and attitudes of an audience, an interactive discussion must take place among the observers. The method for examining the possibility of persuasion based on observed rhetoric will be the most productive through focus groups. The goal of this research proposal is concentrated on the individual acceptance or dismissal of different arguments. The idea of acceptance is not limited to persuasion. It is a way of measuring if an argument is taken seriously and if the argument implements personal inquiry. I want to establish a consensus on personal thought. The success of rhetoric is not based solely on the accomplishment of persuasion, but rather on the emerging existence of personal dialogue inside the minds of individuals.

Contemporary research has been surveying audienceswith a narrow perspective on persuasion. These methods can only gather quantitative data on audiences that experience persuasion. Consequently, researchers are not considering that persuasion is a choice, nor are they discovering if presented rhetoric is successful in the realm of public discourse. There needs to be a paradigm shift in the ways in which persuasion research is conducted and gathered.

The method for this research aims to incorporate the choice of persuasion and the thoughts encountered from rhetoric. It is also a step back. I believe that we cannot measure persuasion alone. The notion of emphasizing the early stages of rhetoric is humbling. Yet, the proposed method is a new way to gather more information. At the very least, focus groups can offer a new insight on the attitudes derived from public discourse, even if the study becomes slightly irrelevant to persuasion.

The setting will have to encompass a stage capable of producing numerous arguments with various practices of rhetoric. The ideal location for this would be a town hall meeting. The presented issues would have to be both political and apolitical. The apolitical arguments would reveal the consideration of arguments that are exposed to open minded individuals who are not entirely familiar with the topic at hand. Conversely, an opinionated political environment can be supplemented in efforts to reveal the capacity that people will accept and engage in opposing viewpoints.

The local political climate can hopefully provide volunteers that are willing to engage in focus groups regarding this study of rhetoric. People are inherently inclined to share their beliefs. The rich history of persuasion connotes that active citizens who attend town hall meetings will be curious about this study. Persuasion and rhetoric have been at the center of public discourse because people do invest interest in the subject. There will be some attendees who would see focus groups as a way for them to share their opinions. Likewise, the citizens who do attend town hall meetings are the individuals who care about public discourse. These are the people that this research needs to find.

During the focus group segments, the discussions will revolve around which arguments truly spoke to them. The exercise will ask but is not limited to the following questions:

1. Were the most convincing arguments made through civility or incivility?
2. Did an authority figure’s opinion have an influence in how you thought about the argument?
3. What information did you immediately disregard and why?
4. Do you think the presentations influenced how you approach the information?
5. Over time, will you continue to develop the arguments into a definite position, or will your stance remain the same?
6. Was there any use of rhetoric that you found to be misleading or manipulative?
7. What role did metaphors play in the way that you began to think about the subject?
8. Are you able to overcome any emotional bias by committing to a process of critical thinking?
9. Are you more likely to dwell on a particular claim if the speaker directly asks to think about the evidence that he or she is presenting?

The conversation will be based on their thoughts, disregarding the presence or absence of persuasion. There will need to be documentation on the observers’ beliefs held before and after the presentations. Later, a follow up questionnaire will be important to see if opinions eventually changed after thinking about the arguments. The second part is a significant way to discover if individuals made a choice based on the outsider dialogue within their own thought processing.

**Conclusion**

The results will need to be broken down and separated by the arguments involving partisan politics and apolitical subject areas. Furthermore, there will need to be an in-depth analysis of the attitudes and emotions presented by the observers. The follow up questionnaire will assess the decision to make a choice on the preference of any particular argument. The goal is to observe the effects that different forms of rhetoric have on people’s thoughts. It is intrinsically crucial to figure out how an argument finds its way into our thoughts.

The concept that an audience can be manipulated by rhetoric or persuasion is not taken into account in this study. The method does not acknowledge that people can be manipulated because it is focused on individuals making rational choices. An irrelevant argument may induce persuasion, but the person is still making a choice, which cannot be in accordance with manipulation.

The self-persuasion theory changes the way researchers can begin to think about rhetoric. The practice has been a tool used to persuade audiences. Now, the focus is on the rhetorical methods that generate thought. There is a lot to learn from the attitudes and emotions of the town hall observers. This study will possibly uncover the process between listening and then thinking about an argument. The goal is to watch the early process of persuasion develop through thoughts.

We may see the effects of inherent bias blocking any argument from ever entering someone’s mind. There may also be a sense of open-mindedness where some individuals will consider multiple positions on an issue. In both cases, the individual is exhibiting a choice to think about an argument and also a choice to align themselves with a particular position. A traditional study would only examine the narrowness of persuasion in action. In the proposed case, the research is focused on the effects that rhetoric can have on the overall capacity to be “persuaded.” This new approach on persuasion opens doors in the broad discussion revolving around public discourse. Hopefully, the change will be able to make connections between argument, rhetoric and persuasion.

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